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ABSTRACT

A study compared the relative effects and functions of a live versus a televised presentation of a political message. Specifically, the study examined whether (1) the audience for a live political speech differed from the audience for a similar televised speech, (2) a live political speech produced more positive attitude change regarding the speaker than did a similar televised speech, and (3) a live political speech served different functions for the audience than did a similar televised speech. Data for the study were derived from two field experimental procedures. One procedure measured an audience's before-and-after responses to a televised speech by a politician: the other measured before and after responses to a live personal appearance by the same politician. Both events occurred within a three-day time span in the same city, had approximately the same intent, and shared approximately the same message content. Telephone interviews elicited information from 89 viewers of the television presentation both before and after the event, and questionnaires were used to gather information from 131 people attending the live event. The results indicated that several characteristics differentiated audiences exposed to the message through the two differing channels. In addition, the live channel produced more positive change toward the candidate than did the television channel. The functions that the events served for individuals also differed. (FL)

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LIVE VS. TELEVISED CHANNELS:

COMPARING AUDIENCES, FUNCTIONS AND EFFECTS

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LIVE VS. TELEVISED CHANNELS:

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Over the past three decades, two channels have become predominate for politicians seeking to communicate with constituents and potential voters. One channels is the live personal appearance/public speaking occasion which serves many purposes for a politician. The second channel is unquestionably the television medium. While political communication scholars have undoubtedly been intrigued by the latter channel, little attention has been given to comparisons of the relative effects and functions of these two media.

Although often overlooked by political communication scholars, live personal appearances are not, of course, recent phenomena. Political rallies and speeches were once almost the sole means at a candidate's disposal for communicating with the public. The historical development first of printing and then of electronic channels of communication obviously widened a candidate's channel choices. As these mass channels grew, political communication scholars considered live candidate speeches to be less and less important, although most acknowledged that rallies and speeches were important in generating coverage in the second predominate channel, television.

A major reason personal appearances have been accorded little attention is that most scholars believe that those who attend political rallies and speeches are already so favorable to the speaker that little attitude change is

likely to occur (Sears & Whitney, 1973; Swanson, 1972; MacNeil, 1968). Audiences for such events are assumed to be homogeneous and atypical of the general population in their fervor for the speaker. Most such beliefs are rooted in acceptance of the selective exposure hypothesis--only those already committed to the candidate bother to attend.

However, several recent studies of live candidate appearances have indicated that attendance at such events can have significant effects on audience members (Sanders & Pace, 1977; Kaid & Hirsch, 1973; Sanders & Kaid, 1979). These studies all indicate that selective exposure provides little explanation for rally attendance or for the composition of audiences at such events. They also substantiate that attendance at live appearances can result in significant positive shifts in a candidate's image. These results seem to demonstrate that live personal appearances are more than just frequent campaign events whose primary purpose is to generate media coverage.

The importance of the second predominate channel needs little elaboration. A review of scholarly research on the effects of television in politics is beyond the scope of this work, but several recent reviews indicate that television is not only heavily studied by communication scholars but increasingly acceded to have substantial direct effects on audiences (Kraus & Davis, 1976; DeVries & Tarrance, 1972; Napolitan, 1972; Sanders & Kaid, 1978).

Empirical attempts by communication scholars to compare the general effectiveness of live versus television presentations have yielded disappointing and ambiguous results. Although Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) and others accord interpersonal communication an advantage over all mass channels in effecting persuasion regarding innovations in real-life settings, most studies of channel variables have not produced such clear-cut results. For example, one study found a live speech produced more attitude change than a videotaped one (Croft, et al., 1968) while a second study found a written message more effective than its live or videotaped counterparts (Wall & Boyd, 1971) and yet a third reported video, print and live presentations equally effective (Sanders & Atwood, 1977).

Aside from their contradictory results, the usefulness of such efforts in comparing political communication channels is questionable. These studies and others like them rely exclusively on experimental designs which necessitate identical stimuli and conditions in each channel. Although entirely appropriate for their purposes, the resulting stimuli and research settings eliminate many of the variables which differentiate communication channels in real-life settings. A live classroom-presented speech no more replicates the excitement of a political rally than a videotaped "talking head" replicates the technical sophistication of a professional political television production. If scholars are to compare

relative effects and functions of political channels, they must resort to natural field experiments.

Consequently, the study reported here sought to compare the relative effects and functions of live versus television presentations of a political message. The importance of these two channels of political communication and the lack of any systematic research comparing their effects in controlled political settings would seem sufficient reason for pursuing such an effort. Additional reasons are apparent in the increased interest in uses and gratifications research wherein Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) have suggested the need to compare the uses which various media perform for individuals.

The following research questions guided the research reported here:

1. Does the audience of a live political speech differ from the audience of a similar television speech?

2. Does a live political speech produce more positive attitude change regarding the speaker than does a similar television speech?

3. Does a live political speech serve different functions for the audience than does a similar televised speech?

METHODS

The data for this study were derived from two field experimental procedures. One procedure measured an audience's before and after reactions to a televised political program, and the other measured before and after reactions to a live personal appearance by the same politician. Both events occurred within a 3-day time span in the same city, had approximately the same intent and shared approximately the same message content.

The televised message was a 25-minute campaign program by Ronald Reagan broadcast in Dallas, Texas, at 8 p.m. on Wednesday, April 29, 1976 (just prior to the May 2 Texas primary election). This program was essentially a replay of a live speech given by Reagan in Midland, Texas, earlier in the same campaign tour. On Monday (April 27) and Tuesday (April 28) evenings before the speech was aired, trained student interviewers administered a pre-test by telephone to 100 subjects in the city of Dallas. Subjects were selected randomly using the random generation of telephone numbers method. The same subjects were given a post-test by telephone in the three days following the televised program.

The final sample for this portion of the study consisted of 89 subjects who were contacted in both pre-test and post-test. The remaining subjects could not be re-contacted in the short time period prior to the primary

election.

The live personal event was a Reagan political rally which occurred on Friday, May 1, in Dallas. While clearly not identical to the television message, the speech delivered by Reagan at this event was approximately the same in content as the televised speech (itself modeled after an earlier live rally presentation). A before-after design was used here also, with questionnaires being distributed randomly to subjects as they entered the rally and collected as they departed. Complete questionnaires were collected for 131 respondents at the rally.

The questionnaire for each group contained the same items. The pre-tests included general demographic information and sought to determine attitudes to Ronald Reagan as measured by a 12-item semantic differential.[1] Post-tests repeated the 12 semantic differential items, sought to determine the functions which the event performed for subjects,[2] and, in the case of the televised message, determined whether or not respondents had viewed the show.

This design allowed comparison of the two events in their naturally occurring settings, thus maximizing the variance between the channels. While there is no contention that the stimulus was identical in each event, the content was similar enough to allow concentration on the channel variable without concern that content differences might account for any variance.

RESULTS

The results are considered in terms of the research questions outlined previously. Overall, results indicate that there are channel differences in all three areas, audience, candidate attitude change, and functions.

Audience:

Several differences are apparent between audiences for a live candidate appearance and its televised counterpart. Table 1 shows that the greatest differences are in the sex and political party characteristics.

Table 1 about here

Males make up a larger percentage of the live audience (51.9%) than the television audience (33.3%). The higher percentage of female television viewers may, however, be partially attributable to the larger number of females in the total television sample, a chronic problem with telephone surveys.

The political party distribution differences are not so easily explained. Television viewers were not predominately of the same political party as the speaker (Republican). In fact, 66.7% of the audience for the television program was composed of Democrats and Independents. This was not true for the live appearance where 82.4%

were Republicans. This percentage is also considerably higher than the percentage of Republicans in the total random telephone sample of the Dallas area, indicating that some selective exposure principle may have been operant in this situation.

On other basic audience characteristics differences are not so apparent. Mean age levels and years of education completed are approximately the same. In addition, no substantial difference exists between live and television respondents according to level of interest in politics. Although one might anticipate that attendance at a political rally would indicate stronger interest in the election and in politics generally, both groups appeared to be "very interested" in political matters. As might be expected, the interest of both groups exceeds that of the general population (based on the total random telephone sample of the Dallas area).

Candidate Attitude Change:

Despite the fact that some selective exposure may have been operant in the live channel situation, the results indicate that the live appearance produced more positive attitude change about the candidate than did the television program. Table 2 illustrates this finding.

Table 2 about here

When pre- and post-test means were compared for each

of the 12 adjective pairs used to measure candidate image, the television program resulted in a significantly higher post-test mean in only one case. The speaker was considered significantly more sophisticated after viewing (4.03) than before (3.70).

On the other hand, the speaker's image improved significantly on 8 of the 12 items in the live appearance. This occurred despite the fact that live audience members seemed to evaluate the candidate higher in the pre-test than did television viewers.

Functions:

The possibility that different political channels perform different functions for the individual is an intriguing one. The results of the comparison here indicate that attending a live speech differs from viewing a similar television program in several areas, as Table 3 indicates.

Table 3 about here

One substantial difference in function performed is the extent to which respondents attended to the message in order "to get to know Reagan better as a person." While 57.3% attended the live performance "a lot" for this reason, only 20% watched the television program for the same reason. Television viewers, however, sought more information on issues in the campaign. Over 60% said they watched "a lot"

for that reason.

Enjoying the excitement of the election was a far more important reason for rally attendance than for television exposure. This is not a surprising result and is, in fact, compatible with earlier findings by Sanders and Kaid (1979) on rally goers.

All in all, the results from this comparison of live versus television appearances of a political candidate seems to indicate substantial differences. Since the field experimental design should have minimized extraneous variables, it seems fair to conclude that these difference are indeed attributable to the differing characteristics of the two channels.

The live channel seems particularly effective in improving a candidate's image. Personal contact with the candidate in such a setting may actually take on many of the characteristics of an interpersonal encounter. The attendee may actually feel that he is experiencing a mutual awareness with the speaker and can actually "get to know him as a person." In addition, the "hoopla" of the rally situation clearly instills a sense of excitement.

Despite the pervasive criticism that television enhances images more than issues, the respondents in this study sought out the television political program "to get more information on the issues." In light of this

finding, future research should concentrate not only on more in-depth comparisons of channel charcteristics but on isolating additional types of effects which might differentiate channels.

NOTES

1. The semantic differential used in this study was a 12-item, 5-point scale consisting of dichotomous adjective pairs. The positive sides of the particular scales used were: qualified, sophisticated, honest, serious, sincere, modern, successful, handsome, serious, conservative, calm, saver. The particular set of scales has been the result of considerable development and testing and has proven to be a good measure of candidate image/evaluation. It has been used in actual political campaign situations to measure candidate image (Russell, 1971; Sanders & Pace, 1977; Miller & Jackson, 1973).

2. The functions (reasons for attending the live appearance or for watching the television program) were adapted from the scales used by Blumler and McQuail (1969). For each of the several suggested reasons, a respondent was asked to indicate whether that reason applied to him/her "a lot," "a little," or "not at all."

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Table 1

Effect of Channel on Audience Characteristics

Characteristic	Live (n=131)	Television Total (n=89)	Television Viewers (n=30)
Age (mean)	45.9	40.1	42.2
Education	13.6	13.4	.3.3
Sex			
Male	51.9%	31.5%	33.3%
Female	48.1%	68.5%	66.7%
Political Party			
Republican	82.4%	30.3%	33.3%
Democrat	5.3%	30.3%	16.7%
Independent	12.2%	39.3%	50.0%
Interest in Politics			
Very interested	65.6%	55.1%	63.3%
Somewhat interested	29.8%	30.3%	26.7%
Not much interested	4.7%	14.6%	10.0%

Table 2

Effect of Channel on Candidate Image Change

	Live (n=131)		Television (n=30)	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Qualified	4.51	4.89*	3.77	3.77
Sophisticated	4.35	4.60*	3.70	4.03*
Honest	4.56	4.85*	4.27	4.07
Serious	2.49	2.31	4.10	4.07
Sincere	4.60	4.91*	4.33	4.17
Modern	2.91	3.06	2.87	2.73
Successful	4.67	4.93*	4.10	4.37
Handsome	4.13	4.41*	3.83	3.83
Friendly	4.60	4.87*	4.37	4.33
Conservative	4.46	4.53	3.73	3.60
Calm	3.53	3.73	3.50	3.17
Saver	4.39	4.67*	3.60	3.17
Overall Mean	4.54	4.77*	3.84	3.77

*The difference between the pre-test mean and the post-test mean is significant at .05, using a t-test.

Table 3

Effects of Channel on Functions

	Live			Television		
Function*	lot	little	not at all	lot	little	not at all
To get more information on issues	51.9	25.2	9.9	63.3	20.0	16.6
To get to know Reagan better as a person	57.3	23.7	8.4	20.0	43.3	36.6
To help me decide who to vote for	26.7	21.4	33.6	30.0	26.6	43.3
To enjoy the excitement of the presidential race	19.1	27.5	32.1	10.0	36.6	33.3

*Numbers represent percentages. In each set, remaining percentages up to 100% consist of no response answers.